

4 Learner autonomy and telecollaborative language learning

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Instead of an abstract

When I was invited to give one of the keynote talks at the Second International Conference on Telecollaboration in Higher Education, my first thought was that I should decline. It is true that for thirty years I was responsible for Trinity College Dublin's self-access language learning facilities and resources; true also that around the turn of the millennium I shared in the empirical exploration of tandem language learning via e-mail and in text-based virtual reality. But although I remain interested in these matters, I cannot pretend to have kept abreast of developments since my retirement. On the other hand, I remain research-active thanks to my abiding obsession with learner autonomy, so my second thought was that I should accept the invitation, say something about learner autonomy as the best way of responding to two persistent problems in L2 education, and then raise some questions for telecollaborative language learning. This article summarises the main points of my talk.

1. Introduction: two persistent problems in L2 education

The more or less universal goal of L2 education is to develop learners' communicative repertoires, and by doing so extend their identity and the scope of their agency. This is what lies behind the Council of Europe's notion of plurilingualism, "a communicative competence to which all knowledge

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and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4). But formal language learning often fails to meet this target, for two reasons. First, the levels of proficiency achieved fall short of curriculum objectives, as the European Commission’s (2012) First European Survey on Language Competences showed; and second, even learners who attain a high level of L2 proficiency, sometimes in several languages, do not think of themselves as plurilingual. This was one of the findings of the city reports compiled by the LUCIDE project (2012–2014; King & Carson, 2015). In reply to the question “Do you consider yourself to be monolingual/bilingual/plurilingual?”, a Dublin interviewee, for example, described herself as “monolingual with some French and Irish” (Carson, McMonagle, & Murphy, 2015, p. 50), even though Irish is a compulsory subject from the beginning to the end of schooling in Ireland and she herself had some professional involvement with the language. A possible explanation for this kind of self-concept is provided by an Oslo interviewee’s reply to the same question:

“I regard myself in a narrow sense monolingual because Norwegian is my language. I am multilingual in the way that I speak and write also English, German, and some French, but it’s all languages that I have learned in school. I’m not using all the languages every day and it’s not part of my everyday life except that I now have to use English a bit more. Because the definition of being bilingual is that you use two languages every day... I’m not bilingual in that way” (Carson, McMonagle, & Skeivig, 2015, p. 75).

According to this interviewee, a sense of oneself as plurilingual depends on regular use of the languages in one’s repertoire as an integral part of daily life.

Despite these educational failures, pedagogical traditions roll on unchallenged. First introduced in the 1970s, so-called communicative approaches to L2 teaching have rarely broken out of the initiation-response-feedback dynamic that shaped earlier teaching methods, and successive generations of technology have

mostly been used in the service of the same dynamic. What is more, research into ‘instructed SLA’ tends not to challenge the pedagogical methods that generate the data it analyses and rarely (if ever) attempts to construct a learning-and-teaching dynamic from first principles.

2. Learner autonomy as the means to success in L2 learning

Against this background I make the following claim. The language learning programmes most apt to develop high levels of Target Language (TL) proficiency and integrated plurilingual repertoires are those in which, from the beginning, learners’ agency is channelled through the TL; those in which, individually and collaboratively, learners use the TL to plan, execute, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Such programmes are based on the construct of learner autonomy, and the paradigm case is the classroom over which Leni Dam presided for thirty years, from the mid-1970s until her retirement in 2007. She taught English to young Danish teenagers in a middle school near Copenhagen and described her approach in a short book published in 1995; for a more detailed description of her classroom practice and an empirical exploration of its outcomes, see [Little, Dam, and Legenhausen \(to appear\)](#).

Before I summarise Dam’s approach in its essentials, I want to illustrate the learning outcomes typical of her classroom. When one of her classes was coming to the end of its fourth year of English (Grade 8, 15 years old), Dam asked each member of the class to write a short text explaining what learning English meant to him or her. The task was immediate: learners were given a sheet of paper and a few minutes in which to collect their thoughts and produce a text. What they wrote was thus close to what they might have said if the task had been to produce an oral text. Here are the (uncorrected) texts produced by two learners, the first a boy and the second a girl:

“Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That

we worked independently... And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own".

"I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our 'together' session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent".

Limitations of space preclude a detailed analysis of these texts. For our present purposes it's enough to note that they both evidence a well-developed capacity to produce reflective discourse that expresses a personal view with unusual fluency. English seems to be a fully integrated part of each learner's communicative repertoire.

3. The autonomy classroom described

In Leni Dam's version of the autonomy classroom, the teacher's goal is to help her learners to become communicatively proficient in the TL. She believes that the surest way of achieving this goal is to engage them from the very beginning in spontaneous and authentic TL use – spontaneous in the sense that it arises unrehearsed from the ebb and flow of classroom activity; authentic in the sense that it focuses on and exploits the interests and aptitudes that the learners bring with them, what [Barnes \(1976\)](#) called their 'action knowledge'. In other words, in the autonomy classroom, students learn the TL by using it to pursue their own interests. As they do so, the capacity for autonomous behaviour that has produced much of their 'action knowledge' is harnessed to

the task of L2 learning. Learners' L1 has an essential role to play in all this. It is, after all, the medium in which they first learned to interact with others, the default medium of their discursive thinking, the basis of whatever linguistic intuitions occur to them, and a central component of their identity. Although it is the teacher's aim that as soon as possible her learners should manage all aspects of their language learning in the TL, in the early stages they are likely to use their L1 for purposes of evaluation. This is due partly to the complexity of the task, and partly because it is easier for them to acquire basic skills and underlying concepts of self- and peer-assessment in their L1 before transferring them to the TL.

From the beginning, the teacher herself uses the TL as the medium of classroom communication, translating words and phrases from the learners' L1 on request and scaffolding their attempts to use the TL, in writing as well as speech. Two tools support the learning process: logbooks (the 'diaries' referred to in the second learner text quoted above) and posters (written on sheets of A3 paper and stuck on the classroom wall). Learners use their logbooks (plain notebooks) to record the content of each lesson, make a note of words and phrases they need to remember, plan homework, write short texts of various kinds, and regularly evaluate their progress. Posters, created in real time by the teacher in interaction with the class, serve a wide variety of purposes. They are used, for example, to gather ideas for homework activities; to give learners the words and phrases they need to interact with one another in the TL; to capture – always in the TL – the results of whole-class brainstorming on topics like “Why should we learn English?” or “What can we do to learn English?”; and to record negotiated rules for general classroom conduct or managing group work. For their first homework, learners are required to write a short text ‘About myself’. The teacher uses posters to give them a simple template for the task and to translate from their L1 to the TL the words and phrases they need to describe themselves (this activity typically yields words that never occur in textbooks for beginners). In due course the learners themselves use posters to plan group projects.

Learning activities fall into two broad categories, learner-created learning materials and learner-generated texts. Learning materials typically take the form of games –

word cards, picture dominoes, picture lotto, board games. Learner-generated texts begin with ‘About myself’, move on to ‘Picture + text’ (learners choose a picture from a magazine, stick it in their logbook, and write a descriptive or narrative text about it), and then to plays, poems, stories, magazines, etc. that are usually produced by groups of learners over several weeks (for examples, see [Dam, 1995](#) and [Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, to appear](#)). Because everything happens as far as possible in the TL, the boundaries between intentional learning and creative language use are fuzzy, and traditional distinctions between the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are difficult to maintain. The dynamic of the classroom depends crucially on writing in order to speak and speaking in order to write. In their logbooks, their learning materials and the texts they produce, learners use writing to *construct* the TL; and their non-stop use of writing makes learning visible, encourages a focus on form, and provides a basis for reflection and evaluation. As learning progresses, learners become more proficient in performing three interacting roles. They are communicators, using and gradually developing their communicative skills in the TL; experimenters with language, gradually developing an explicit knowledge of the TL system; and intentional learners, gradually developing explicit awareness of language learning.

In what follows I use this brief description of the autonomy classroom to raise some questions for telecollaborative language learning.

4. Some questions for telecollaborative language learning

In the autonomy classroom, learners accept responsibility for their learning, set their own learning targets within the framework provided by the curriculum, choose and create their own learning materials and activities, and evaluate learning outcomes. They do these things in their TL, as committed members of the language learning community to which they belong; and because the learning-and-teaching dynamic is grounded in spontaneous and authentic TL use, autonomous language learning and autonomous language use are inseparable, two sides of the same coin.

Questions for telecollaborative practice:

- Is your telecollaborative L2 learning embedded in a larger L2 learning dynamic that shares the characteristics of the learning environment I have described? If not, why not?
- How do you ensure that your students accept overall responsibility for their learning?
- How do you expect them to keep a cumulative record of their learning?
- Within the constraints of your curriculum, how do you give them choice?
- How do you provide for evaluation and self-assessment?

Language is inescapably dialogic. It evolved out of collaborative interaction, and children acquire it thanks to an ‘interactive instinct’ (Lee et al., 2009; Trevarthen, 1992); it helps to shape consciousness dialogically – according to Mead (1934), consciousness entails ‘becoming other to oneself’ (Gillespie, 2005); it also helps to shape cognition dialogically – individual cognition is impregnated with partially shared language, norms, knowledge and conceptual systems (Linell, 2009, p. 79); and when we engage in reflective thinking, ‘internal’ voices are invoked and interpenetrate (Linell, 2009; cf. Bråten, 1992 and Fernyhough, 2016). The autonomy classroom deliberately exploits the dialogic nature of language in its emphasis on the interactive, interdependent nature of language, language learning, and language use.

Questions for telecollaborative practice:

- How *exactly* do you exploit the dialogic structure of telecollaboration to promote L2 learning?
- How do you make your students aware of the potential of telecollaboration to support their proficiency development?

- What kinds of discourse initiative are available to your students, and how *exactly* do they take them?
- Telecollaboration exploits digital communication channels that most of your students use in their daily lives: do your telecollaborative projects take sufficient account of this?

The autonomy classroom grounds L2 learning in the learner's 'action knowledge', the complex of knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes that are central to his or her identity. Our subjective identities are partly shaped by the language(s) in which we think about ourselves, present ourselves, and engage with the world; and they are dialogic in the sense that we experience them in relation to others who are similar to or different from us. As [Maturana and Varela \(1992\)](#) put it: "We work out our lives in a mutual linguistic coupling, not because language permits us to reveal ourselves but because we are constituted in language in a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others" (pp. 234-235).

Questions for telecollaborative practice:

- How do you configure the use of telecollaboration to ensure that your students' identity is fully engaged with the process?
- In what ways are the telecollaborative practices you require your students to engage in calculated to draw the TL into their identity?
- Can you find ways of linking telecollaboration for academic purposes with telecollaboration of a more general kind?

In the autonomy classroom, learners are continuously engaged in activities that require them to exploit the 'technology of literacy'. As a process, non-stop writing ensures a focus on linguistic form; in this sense, as [Olson \(1991\)](#) has pointed out, writing *is* metalinguistics. The continuous production of written text also generates learning outcomes. This use of writing is embedded in oral

interaction between the teacher and the whole class, between the teacher and groups of learners, between the teacher and individual learners, and among learners working in pairs and small groups. Especially in the early stages, writing supports speaking, while spoken interaction generates written text.

Questions for telecollaborative practice:

- Does your telecollaborative practice combine oral and written communication?
- If yes, how do you use the oral channel to support the development of writing and the written channel to support oral communication?
- If no, how do you link the use of oral or written telecollaboration to students' written or oral activities in non-electronic media?

5. Conclusion

I began by pointing out that although L2 education is characterised by a serious mismatch between curriculum goals and learning outcomes, traditional teaching-and-learning dynamics survive largely unchallenged. I went on to argue that approaches based on the concept of learner autonomy:

- ground L2 learning in spontaneous and authentic TL use that is partly led by the learners;
- require learners to take responsibility for their learning and document both the learning process and its outcomes;
- frame teaching and learning in a recursive dynamic of planning, implementation and evaluation;
- use writing to support speaking and speaking to generate written text;

- and in these ways, ensure that learners' L2 proficiency is part of their developing identity and extends their capacity for agentive behaviour.

This recapitulation prompts a final question:

Will emerging telecollaborative practice contribute to the evolution of a new learning-and-teaching dynamic that extends learners' identity and their capacity for agentive behaviour, or will it simply add some extra limbs to a pedagogical tradition that has long been sclerotic?

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